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ABSTRACT

This paper compares three supernatural vampire novels geared for adolescents with Freud's discussion of "The Uncanny." Freud's 1919 essay is probably the most important early essay to influence Gothic criticism. To evaluate the adolescent vampire novels, adults must view the books as if they were peer texts, on behalf of a child, and with an eye to discussing them with other adults. They need to understand a book's appeal on its own terms and understand how an individual book and the entire genre appeals to children. The paper assesses each of the three vampire novels by Caroline B. Cooney, drawing on Freud's essay. In the three novels, the teenagers' wishes come true, and then the conscience, the Freudian "double," asserts its dominance. In this way the books gratify and indulge adolescent narcissism, and yet also lead the teenager forward, stressing the importance of adopting the role of a responsible adult. It is possible that it is this which is the real horror to the teenage readers of these novels. (Contains 16 endnotes.) (Author/SWC)

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Freud's "The Uncanny" in Caroline B. Cooney's "Vampire Trilogy"

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"My understanding," said their vampire, "is that younger humans enjoy being frightened. It's the age, you know." [1]

Charles Sarland describes a selection of ten novels in the Point Horror series as "psychological thrillers", and goes on to argue: "In a sense "Point Horror" is something of a misnomer since none of the plots involves the supernatural or the metaphysical..." [2] As I have written elsewhere, [3] while this is true of the novels Sarland refers to, it is not true of almost as many others which he does not mention, including Sinclair Smith's *Dream Date*, Diane Hoh's *The Accident*, D. E. Athkins' *The Cemetery*, and Caroline B. Cooney's *The Perfume, Freeze Tag, The Cheerleader, The Return of the Vampire* and *The Vampire's Promise*. Everyone of these books **does** feature some supernatural, always evil, phenomenon. I want to emphasize, therefore, before moving on, that in my opinion there are two Point Horror narratives: the thriller and the supernatural story, and it is the latter category I want to discuss today.

In his essay "The Uncanny" (1919), probably the most important early essay to influence criticism of the Gothic, Freud pragmatically observes that it has been a long time since he has "experienced or heard of anything which has given him an uncanny impression." He notes, therefore, in the third person, that he will begin his study "by taking himself into that state of feeling, by awakening in himself the possibility of experiencing it." [4] Adult readers of Point Horror novels may find themselves in a position analogous to Freud's - these novels may not scare us, but we are aware that they can frighten adolescents. Peter Hunt suggests: "When adults find themselves reading children's books, they usually have to read in four different ways, simultaneously." [5] These four different ways, Hunt continues, are as follows: as if they were peer texts, on behalf of a child, with an eye to discussing it with other adults, and surrendering to the book on its own terms. There is a category of response which I think is missing here: the wish to understand the appeal to the book on its own terms. There is a category of response which I think is missing here: the wish to understand the appeal to the child of a specific book, or, in this case, the appeal of an entire genre. (Is this, in fact, a subset of category three: "with an eye to discussing it with other adults", bearing in mind that the adult with whom the book is discussed may be oneself?)

Over three million copies of Point Horror novels have now been sold, and given the widely-observed practice of readers exchanging the books, many millions more have probably been read. I don't wish to raise the **very** general question: Why? This would clearly require considerably more time than I have, but I would now like to place several of the supernatural Point Horror novels alongside "The Uncanny" and then consider various points at which the novels seem to illustrate some of the issues raised in Freud's essay. I want to discuss three novels in particular: *The Cheerleader* (1991), *The Return of the Vampire* (1992) and *The Vampire's Promise* (1993). All these novels are by Caroline B. Cooney, and all three are concerned with one of the oldest forms of evil in literature: The Vampire. The presence of a vampire clearly endorses one of Freud's comments on the uncanny: "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality..." [6]

In addition, the very fact that there are three of these novels endorses Freud's observation that repetition is often a vital aspect of the uncanny, which often manifests itself as "the constant recurrence of the same thing - the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several generations." [7] In *The Cheerleader* a vampire promises Althea (the exotic names are a feature of all three novels) popularity, the holy grail of conventional teenagers, but it must be at the expense of some other peers, and Althea must give the vampire permission to feed off them. As she flourishes, they wither. Eventually, Althea refuses to sacrifice anybody else and accepts her lack of popularity before moving away. In

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The Return of the Vampire, Devnee's family move into the empty house and Devnee makes a similar bargain with the vampire, but she wishes for beauty and then intelligence, recognizing that these, and in that order, are the qualities that bestow popularity. As Devnee becomes beautiful, the luckless Aryssa loses her beauty. Similarly, after several visits from the vampire, the once intelligent Victoria becomes increasingly stupid while Devnee becomes increasingly brilliant. As occurs in *The Cheerleader*, Devnee eventually refuses to sacrifice any more of her friends and the vampire is routed by her selflessness. She too, moves away. In *The Vampire's Promise*, Cooney shifts her attention onto a group of teenagers, although within this group another young girl, Lacey, is the narrative's central focus, who becomes trapped in the now abandoned house by the vampire. He offers to let them go - if they will choose which one of them is to be his victim. As is characteristic of much horror writing in general, Cooney refuses to close her vampire books; another novel is implicit in the conclusion of *The Vampire's Promise*.

> And the shadows that were the vampires hung in the sky, and departed, desperate, for they had only a few hours until dawn, only a few hours in which to find another nest. But usually, for vampire, a few hours is enough. (P.166)

Freud notes: "The German word "**unheimlich**" ("uncanny") is obviously the opposite of "**heimlich**" ("homely")..."[8] The same house is central to Cooney's Trilogy and it's possible to argue that another reason for the popularity of these novels is her conflation of two well-established horror conventions: the Haunted House and the Vampire. In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King quotes from Anne Rivers Siddons, the author of *The House Next Door* (1978), one of the most celebrated horror novels of recent years: "The haunted house has always spoken specially and directly to me as the emblem of a particular horror. Maybe it's because, to a woman, her house is so much more than that: it is kingdom, responsibility, comfort, total world to her..."[9] The central character in each of the three Vampire novels is, of course, female.

I don't think it would be fair to the memory of Freud to omit any mention of sex, but firstly it needs to be pointed out that nobody ever actually **has** sex in a Point Horror novel. But this would not have stopped Freud, and it's not going to stop me. After all, the implicit promise of sex, the incipient recognition of its imminence is present in all the Point Horror novels that I have read. Cooney writes in *The Return of the Vampire*, neatly conflating a trinity of adolescent reoccupations: gender specificity, confusion of identity, and sexuality in a single sentence: "The girls wanted to look like Aryssa, but the boys wanted to have her." [10] Although the three principal characters are females, of course both boys and girls read these novels. Freud writes: "A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough of a substitute for the fear of being castrated." [11] Although most of the activity in the three novels takes place at night, which necessarily involves a reduction in vision, eyes do not feature prominently in Cooney's Trilogy. However, in *The Return of the Vampire*, a crucial, and speaking personally a very memorable scene, is set in a school laboratory, where Devnee and Aryssa are instructed to dissect a cow's eyeball: "The eyeball before them was immense, as if it were several eyes rolled together... the eyeball stared on. Devnee put a scalpel through it." (p. 62) Naturally, I have no way of knowing if I'm the only male reader who has shivered a little during that scene.

Freud notes that a prominent characteristic of the uncanny is "what we should call telepathy -, so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other".[12] This phenomenon occurs in all three of the Vampire novels. In *The Cheerleader*, Althea only has to think of the Vampire and he appears:' "You wanted me?" he said. "How flattering."' [13] In *The Return of the Vampire*, the relationship between Devnee and the Vampire is even more intimate: "**If it isn't worth it to you, I'll give it to somebody else**, said the vampire, from right inside her mind. She had forgotten that he shared it with her now. That he could live there if he chose." (p. 86) In *The Vampire's Promise*, the vampire reads the individual minds of the whole group, mocking them and preventing them escaping.

Ultimately, in all three novels, it is the conscience of the central character which defeats the vampire; in each case the protagonist refuses to sacrifice more of her friends and accepts the "ordinariness" which she has briefly transcended. Freud sees the conscience as related to the issue of the **doppleganger**, or double:

> The fact that an agency of this kind exists, which is able to treat the rest of the ego like an object - the fact, that is, that man is capable of self-observation - renders it possible to invest the old idea of a "double" with a new meaning and to ascribe a number of things to it - about all, those things that seem to self-criticism to belong to the surmounted narcissism of earliest times.[14]

It is possible to argue, therefore, that the character's plight reinforces, or revivifies, the adolescent reader's own narcissistic impulses, impulses they are being asked to abandon in order to participate in adult life.

Freud further notes that the uncanny experience often contains "a Doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self."[15] This, too, is a common feature of all three novels, naturally enough, in that the vampire effectively "transplants" the desirable qualities of other people into the protagonist, making it eventually difficult for her to determine exactly who she is. This is particularly striking in *The Return of the Vampire*, when Devnee wonders: "Where is Aryssa? Is she me? Is she half me? Am I half her?" (p. 77)

Freud concludes his essay with an evaluation of the uncanny as manifested in Literature, and notes, in a sentence which encapsulates many of the central concerns of the Vampire trilogy: "Let us take the uncanny associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, with the prompt fulfillment of wishes, with secret injurious powers and with the return of the dead."[16] Immediate wish fulfillment is central to both *The Cheerleader* and *The Return of the Vampire*, in that both Althea and Devnee actively wish to be desirable. In the latter novel, Devnee makes her wish, in the full knowledge that it will harm Alyssa:

> She tried not to complete the wish. She tried to be satisfied with her lot in life.
> She failed.
> **Wish I were beautiful!** (P. 22)

Such wish fulfillment, an example of what Freud calls the "omnipotence of thought", is, I would suggest, primarily regressive and, therefore, immensely pleasurable to the adolescent who is beginning to realize that his or her own wishes will not be immediately gratified by a benign universe.

In these novels wishes do come true, and then the conscience, the Freudian "double", asserts its dominance - in this way the books gratify and indulge adolescent narcissism, and yet they also lead the teenage forward, stressing the importance of adopting the role of a responsible adult. Indeed it's possible that it is this which is the real horror to the teenage readers of these novels.

Notes

1. Caroline B. Cooney, *The Vampire's Promise* (London: Scholastic, 1993) p. 121.
2. Charles Sarland, *Signal* 73, January 1994, p. 49.
3. "Point Horror: The Point of Horror", *Researching Children's Literature: A Coming of Age?* Eds. Broadbent, Hogan, Inkson and Millar (Southampton: LSU Publications, 1994)
4. Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Volume XVII, translated James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978) p. 220.
5. Peter Hunt, *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 47.
6. Freud, *The Complete Works*, Volume XLVII, p. 244.
7. Freud, *The Complete Works*, Volume XLVII, p. 234.
8. Freud, *The Complete Works*, Volume XLVII, p. 220.
9. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (Futura: London, 1981) p. 305.
10. Caroline B. Cooney, *The Return of the Vampire* (Scholastic: London, 1992) p. 58.
11. Freud, *The Complete Works*, Volume XLVII, p. 231.
12. Freud, *The Complete Works*, Volume XLVII, p. 234.
13. Caroline B. Cooney, *The Cheerleader* (London: Scholastic, 1991), p. 40.
14. Freud, *The Complete Works*, Volume XLVII, p. 235.
15. Freud, *The Complete Works*, Volume XLVII, p. 234.
16. Freud, *The Complete Works*, Volume XLVII, p. 247.